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ABSTRACT

Minnesota Statute 169.685 (Seat Belts and Passenger Restraint Systems for Children) requires all drivers to correctly place children under the age of 4 years in child car seats. In response to the requirements of the amended statute, this report presents information to the Minnesota legislature on the commissioner's activities and expenditure of funds related to this section. The report presents background information on the use of car seats and their impact on reducing deaths of children in traffic accidents. The report further describes the activities and expenditures of the Office of Traffic Safety, including the purchase of child car seats for needy families and progress in providing standardized up-to-date instruction and certification for child passenger safety advocates across the state. The report concludes by noting that the large amount accrued in the fund and the discounted price of car seats available will allow more low-income families to receive the seats they need. (KB)

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THE MINNESOTA CHILD PASSENGER RESTRAINT AND EDUCATION ACCOUNT

A Report To The Minnesota Legislature
On Activities And Expenditures
As Required By The 1994 Session Laws,
Chapter 635, Section 15
As Contained In M. S. 169.685, Subdivision 7.

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September 22, 1999

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INTRODUCTION

The estimated cost of preparing this report was $250.00. The costs consisted only of time to write the report. Research and meeting time would have been necessary regardless of the report requirement.

The passage of Chapter 635, Section 15 of the session laws of 1994, amended Minnesota Statute 169.685 (Seat Belts and Passenger Restraint Systems for Children) by adding Subd. 7 to the statute.

> Subd. 7. **Appropriation; special account; legislative report.** The Minnesota child passenger restraint and education account is created in the state treasury, consisting of fines collected under subdivision 5 and other money appropriated or donated. The money in the account is annually appropriated to the commissioner of public safety, to be used to provide child passenger restraint systems to families in financial need and to provide an educational program on the need for and proper use of child passenger restraint systems. The commissioner shall report to the legislature by February 1 of each odd-numbered year on the commissioner's activities and expenditure of funds under this section.

This report has been written in response to the bill's requirement.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Child Car Seats

Minnesota Statute 169.685 requires all drivers to correctly place children under the age of four in child car seats. There are two basic kinds of car seats. Infant car seats are designed only for children up to 20 pounds in weight; they recline 45 degrees and face the rear of the vehicle. Convertible car seats can be used for infants and children up to 40 pounds in weight. When convertible seats are used for infants, they recline 45 degrees and are placed facing the rear of the vehicle, for children over 20 pounds the seat is upright and faces forward. While progress has been made by car seat manufacturers in designing user-friendly seats, chances are extremely high that someone trying to install a seat without careful reference to both the car seat and vehicle manuals will make a mistake that compromises the effectiveness of the seat.

When used correctly, child seats reduce death by 69 percent for infants less than one year old and by 47 percent for toddlers from the age of one through four[1]. Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for children and young adults from the age of one year to 34 years[2]. The correct use of car seats can make a great difference in the quality of life, as well as the length of life of Minnesota's children.

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[1] National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
[2] Ibid.

CURRENT INFORMATION

Activities and Expenditures

The Office of Traffic Safety within the Department of Public Safety administers federal (402) state and community traffic safety monies from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. One of the areas in which that funding is used is child car seats. The Office of Traffic Safety brought the child passenger safety program in house in February of 1998. The program is called Buckle Up Kids!, the Minnesota Child Passenger Safety Program. The primary duties of the program are to provide training, education, public information, and low cost car seat loan and purchase programs.

The funds in the Child Passenger Restraint and Education Account are dedicated to be used to purchase child car seats for families in need and supplement training for instructors. The Office of Traffic Safety uses a competitive bid process to select a car seat manufacturer from which to purchase seats with monies from this account.

Misuse of child seats is a national problem. In Minnesota, the rate of correct use is at most 10 percent. Correct use of child seats (age appropriate, with the child correctly and securely in the seat and the seat correctly affixed to the vehicle) is critical to the health of children and a major concern of parents. The best (and perhaps only) way for a parent or other care giver to find out if he or she is using a car seat correctly is to find and attend a car seat "clinic" where trained advocates can check and correct the installation as well as match each seat against manufacturers' recall lists. Those volunteers that staff clinics attend training to receive the background knowledge and practical experience necessary to perform this critical public health function.

There has long been a recognized need for establishing "quality control" on child car seat course content and instructor credentials to ensure that the information being taught and materials disseminated are up-to-date, accurate and consistent with best safety practices. Outdated or poorly communicated information has contributed to misunderstandings and confusion for parents and other care givers. By bringing the child passenger safety program into the Department, great progress has been made in providing standardized up-to-date instruction and certification for child passenger safety advocates across the state.

Because of the transition of the services related to child passenger safety from a contractor to staff within the Department, and the time needed to hire an expert and set up the program, no funds were expended in SFY 1998. Therefore, the fund accrued to a larger amount allowing for an increased discounted bulk purchase of child car seats.

In SFY 1999 $2,052.38, was used to train child passenger safety technicians, practioners, and other advocates for the distribution programs. (The vast majority of expenses incurred to train those instructors is paid through federal funding from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration - NHTSA.)

As expected, new NHTSA federal regulations for the performance of child car seats became effective on September 1, 1999. Because these regulations not only effected the

safety performance requirements that must be met and the price of child car seats, but also the basic nature of the seats themselves, the Department again held off on bidding for seats until the new regulations were known and could be built into the specifications for Minnesota's bid. The Departments of Administration and Public Safety are currently working on a competitive bid that will provide approximately $150,000 in car seats for needy families.

CONCLUSION

With the large amount accrued in the fund, the discounted price of seats will allow many more seats to be purchased. More families will be served in SFY 2000 than have ever been in the past or are likely to be in any single year in the future. Not only will low income families receive the seats they need, but also they will receive proper, up-to-date education in the correct use of seats by experienced child passenger safety instructors.